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ABSTRACT

This study examined sex and age differences in elementary school students' perceptions of conflict and violence and of the effectiveness of various intervention strategies to resolve conflicts. A total of 51 third-graders, 75 fourth-graders, and 95 fifth-graders who had been trained by researchers to be peer mediators participated in the study. The students completed a 21-item questionnaire on their perceptions of conflict, violence, and ways to resolve conflict. The results indicated significant gender differences on 8 of the 21 items, with more girls than boys responding that they thought there was too much violence on television (72 percent versus 44 percent), tried to talk things over when there was a conflict (93 percent versus 79 percent), and tried to find out what the problem was when there was a conflict (92 percent versus 78 percent). More boys than girls thought that using violence proved that you are tough (16 percent versus 7 percent) and tried to hit the person with whom they were having the conflict (21 percent versus 10 percent). Few significant grade-level differences were found. (A copy of the questionnaire is appended.) (MDM)

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Gender and Grade Differences in Elementary Students' Perceptions of Conflict/Violence and Intervention Strategies

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Acts of violence in schools, which have escalated during the past 10 years, have become a leading concern (Elam, Rose, & Gallop as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Today, violence is a leading cause of death for Americans between ages 15 and 24 (Tanner, 1997). Researchers are attempting to reverse this trend toward violent behavior among young people by developing conflict resolution programs as well as by examining related variables which may contribute to a propensity toward violence. The purpose of this study was to determine if there are significant gender and grade differences in perceptions of conflict, violence, and intervention strategies in a sample of elementary students.

In an earlier study with junior high school students, Bailey and Kazelskis (1996) found significant gender differences on more than half of the Conflict/Violence Questionnaire items and significant grade-level differences on one fifth of the scale items. Statements on this questionnaire were designed to determine the adolescent students' perceptions of ways they would resolve conflicts such as hitting, running away, ignoring, talking it out, or asking friends for help. Results from this study indicated that females were more in agreement than males ($p < .01$) with the notion that there is too much violence on television, that conflict is a part of everyday life, and that females try to find out what the conflict is about, to understand

the other point of view, to talk out a conflict, and to get help from a grown-up. Males were more in agreement than females ($p < .001$) with the notion that there is a winner or loser in a conflict, that it is easier to handle a conflict when you hide your feelings, and that using violence proves that you are tough. Further, the study revealed that when there is a conflict more males than females try to hit the other person, try to make a joke of the existing conflict, and try to get their friends to gang up on the other person.

Examining sex differences in education gained impetus in the 1970s with the passage of Title IX legislation which was supposed to help students and teachers acquire sex equity in school-related areas. However, after 20 years of affirmative action, sexism is alive and well at all grade levels in the 1990s according to Myra and David Sadker of American University, who have been conducting sex equity research across the United States for a number of years. Their comprehensive research was synthesized in a book, Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). One of the reported findings is that boys are being "miseducated." The Sadkers based their view on the notion that "boys are raised to be active, aggressive, and independent but upon entering school they are expected to be quiet, passive, and conforming" (p. 198). The consensus is that boys are walking a tightrope between compliance and rebellion. Although there are schools which provide additional resources and attention for boys, for some it is still

not enough, for more males than females drop out of schools or become severe behavior problems. Also, the pressure of conforming often becomes too much, and by adolescence the stereotype male role is so ingrained that violent behavior is the accepted norm.

Considering this somewhat inevitable prospective, the question may be asked, "Can these violent behaviors be eliminated, or reduced, especially in males?" With intervention training, children can learn to be less violent, according to a research study conducted in the State of Washington by a team of pediatricians and psychologists (Grossman et al., 1997). Participants in the violence prevention curriculum were 790 second-grade and third-grade students from six matched pairs of schools. The students were 53% male and 79% white. Used in the curriculum were 30 specific lessons to teach social skills related to anger management, impulse control, and empathy. These lessons were taught for 35 minutes once or twice weekly. After being adjusted for sex, age, socioeconomic status, race, academic performance, household size, and class size, the change scores did not differ significantly between intervention and control schools for any of the parent-reported or teacher-reported behavior scales. However, the behavior observations did reveal an overall decrease 2 weeks after the curriculum in physical aggression ($p = .03$) and an increase in neutral prosocial behavior ($p = .04$) in the intervention group compared with the control group. At the final evaluation, those who had taken the course exhibited about 30 fewer acts of aggressive behavior every

day than children who had not taken the course. The participants also exhibited more than 800 neutral or positive acts per class every day than children who had not taken the course. Aggressive behavior including hitting, kicking, and shoving increased in students who had not taken the course.

Not all violence prevention programs experience success. Apparently, some programs are put into place with the assumption that "a few hours of educational intervention can 'fix' students who engage in violent behavior" (Johnson & Johnson, 1995, p. 64). Other erroneous assumptions are that a few hours of training can prepare teachers to conduct the program and, more important, that programs designed to change "street violence" work in the school setting. The Johnsons go on to say that

> Initiating a violence prevention program will not reduce violence in schools and society as a whole. While violence does need to be prevented, programs that focus exclusively on violence prevention may generally be ineffective. Schools must go beyond violence prevention to conflict resolution training. (p. 64)

If conflict resolution training is to be effective, there needs to be a theoretical framework to guide the development of peace-promoting programs. Johnson and Johnson (1996) stated that "Dual concerns theories posit two major concerns in conflict resolution: (a) concern for reaching one's goals and (b) concern about maintaining an appropriate relationship with the other person" (p. 465). In order to reach these goals, there are five

main strategies for resolving conflicts: (a) problem solving, (b) compromise, (c) smoothing the relationship, (d) withdrawing, and (e) win-lose where one disputant convinces the other to yield. It has been suggested that conflict is a necessary and positive condition for development and growth of children and adolescents; therefore, schools should encourage and promote conflict and be conflict positive rather than conflict negative. Nevertheless, moving students in a conflict positive direction requires specific training.

Conflict resolution has been defined as "a discipline that teaches people the skills of resolving conflict in a way that leads to win-win solutions" (Prutzman as cited by Moore, 1997, p. 1). Several interpersonal skills are considered integral to the mastery of conflict resolution. In this category, the six types of abilities needed for effective implementation of the problem-solving process of conflict resolution are orientation abilities, perception abilities, emotional abilities, communication abilities, creative thinking abilities, and critical thinking abilities (Crawford & Bodine as cited by Moore, 1997).

The majority of conflict resolution programs, however, emphasize learning the skills of problem solving, communication, decision making, negotiation, and mediation rather than the aforementioned abilities. These are the same skills attorneys and trained qualified adults use to negotiate conflicts which have been ordered by the court to be resolved through mediation. A

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logical question could be, "Are elementary students capable of using these adult-like skills to help their peers resolve conflicts peacefully?" One group of researchers found that students in third through fifth grades were able to learn mediation vocabulary as well as knowledge of the mediation process (George, Keiter, Halpin, Halpin, & Dagnese, 1995). It was also found that girls showed a greater gain than boys and students from low socioeconomic schools had a wider margin of improvement than students from middle and higher socioeconomic schools. Even though elementary students do learn mediation skills, some skills are perceived to be more difficult than others. When asked to select the most difficult part of the mediation process, 34.6% of the elementary students named listening and paraphrasing and an equal number said "solution storming," the process of listing a number of ways to resolve a conflict (George, Dagnese, Halpin, Halpin, & Keiter, 1996). Although some aspects of the training may be a challenge, 96.9% of these students said if given a choice they would become a mediator again.

Given that some students seem willing and capable of helping their peers resolve conflicts through mediation, the next logical question is "How would these young mediators resolve their own conflicts--by problem solving, denial, or confrontation?" Other related questions include "How do these trained peacemakers feel about violence on television?" "Are boys more violent than girls?" "Does using violence prove that you are tough?" "Is

mediation a better way to resolve a conflict than walking away or having a confrontation?" These are some of the questions which were considered in this study with the focus being on gender and grade-level differences in student responses.

Method

Subjects in this study were 51 third-grade students, 75 fourth-grade students, and 95 fifth-grade students from nine schools in a large metropolitan school district located in the Southeast. High, medium, and low socioeconomic levels were represented. These students had been trained in their respective schools by the researchers to be peer mediators using the Peaceful Solutions Peer Mediation Training Program (George & Keiter, 1993).

A 21-item questionnaire adapted from the one administered to junior high students by Bailey and Kazelskis (1996) was given to the elementary students participating in this study approximately 6 weeks following their completion of 13 1/4 hours of peer mediation training. The questionnaire assessed their perceptions of conflict, violence, and ways to resolve conflicts.

Resulting data were analyzed using chi-square analyses to look at gender and grade-level differences in student responses to the questionnaire items and contingency coefficients to look at effect size or the magnitude of the relationships between the independent variables (gender and grade level) and the dependent variables (responses to items on the questionnaire).

Results

Chi-square analyses revealed a number of significant gender differences but few grade-level differences. Looking first at the differences in boys (n = 103) and girls (n = 118), we found that a larger percentage of the girls (72%) than of the boys (44%) thought that there was too much violence on television, $X^2(1, N = 221) = 18.24$, $p < .001$; contingency coefficient = .28. More of the girls (93%) than of the boys (79%) tried to talk things over when there was conflict, $X^2(1, N = 217) = 9.69$, $p < .01$; contingency coefficient = .21. A larger percentage of the girls (91%) than of the boys (78%) would try to get help from a grown-up, $X^2(1, N = 219) = 7.41$, $p < .01$; contingency coefficient = .18. More of the girls (60%) than of the boys (46%) also indicated that they would seek help from their peers, $X^2(1, N = 219) = 4.75$, $p < .05$; contingency coefficient = .15. More so than the boys (78%), the girls (92%) tried to find out what the problem was when there was conflict, $X^2(1, N = 221) = 9.60$, $p < .01$; contingency coefficient = .20. Also in contrast to the boys (71%), more of the girls (84%) tried to listen to the other person, $X^2(1, N = 221) = 5.41$, $p < .05$; contingency coefficient = .15.

More boys (16%) than girls (7%) thought that using violence proves that you are tough, $X^2(1, N = 221) = 5.18$, $p < .05$; contingency coefficient = .15. Further, more boys (21%) than girls (10%) try to hit the person with whom they are having

conflict, $X^2(1, N = 218) = 4.93$, $p < .05$; contingency coefficient = .15.

With regard to grade-level differences, few significant differences were found. In response to only one of the questions did students in the different grades differentially respond. More of the students in the third grade (76%) than in the fourth grade (53%) or in the fifth grade (56%) said that they would try to use mediation when there was conflict between their brother(s) or sister(s).

Discussion

As just noted, results of the present study examining gender and grade-level differences in elementary students' perceptions of violence and ways students resolve conflicts revealed minimal grade-level differences. Differences found were for out-of-school conflicts with the third-grade students more likely to use mediation in conflict situations with siblings. Given that significance was found in only one instance, however, one might reasonably conclude that this difference was a chance one.

On the other hand, gender differences were found on 8 of the 21 items on the questionnaire. The boys in this study were more likely to resort to violence while the girls were more prone to listen and to try to resolve the conflict. Such findings are congruent with results from the Bailey and Kazelskis (1996) study with adolescents.

Boys in the elementary grades studied, just as their junior high counterparts, reported that using violence would prove that

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they were tough. When they were mad, they would hit the other person involved in a conflict. However, significantly more of the elementary girls, as well as junior high girls, said that they would try to find out what the problem was, try to talk it out, and/or try to get help if there was a conflict. Further, significantly more of the elementary girls than boys thought that there was too much violence on television.

In accordance with the Sadkers (1994) and others, results of this study indicate that young males still perceive themselves as being aggressive, which is in contradiction to school expectations for conformity and passive behavior. Such findings are in agreement with the literature which reported gender differences in perceptions of violence and the ways that boys and girls resolve conflicts.

Further research is needed to determine effective ways to help boys and girls resolve conflicts peacefully. It seems that gender differences are formed early and persist. An understanding of these differences by educators is crucial so that they can customize their conflict resolution interventions to fit the perceptions and to meet the needs of both boys and girls and to start these interventions early so as to stem the tide of increasing violence.

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STUDENT VOLENCE/CONFLICT/MEDIATION QUESTIONNAIRE

GRADE_____ BOY_____ GIRL_____SCHOOL _____

(CHECK ONE ANSWER)

1. THERE IS TOO MUCH VIOLENCE ON T.V. YES____ NO____

2. IN A CONFLICT THERE IS A WINNER AND A LOSER. YES____ NO____

3. CONFLICT USUALLY ENDS IN VIOLENCE. YES____ NO ____

4. BOYS ARE MORE VIOLENT THAN GIRLS. YES____ NO____

5. CONFLICT IS PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE. YES____ NO____

6. CONFLICT HURTS FRIENDSHIPS. YES____ NO ____

7. USING VIOLENCE PROVES THAT YOU ARE TOUGH. YES____ NO____

8. WHEN I'M MAD, I TRY TO HIT THE OTHER PERSON. YES____ NO____

9. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT, I TRY TO GET HELP FROM ANOTHER KID. YES____ NO____

10. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT, I TRY TO TALK IT OUT. YES____ NO ____

11. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT, I TRY TO IGNORE IT. YES____ NO____

12. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT, I TRY TO GET HELP FROM A GROWN-UP. YES____NO____

13. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT, I TRY TO MAKE THE OTHER PERSON APOLOGIZE. YES____ NO____

14. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT, I TRY TO FIND OUT WHAT THE PROBLEM IS. YES____NO____

15. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT, I TRY TO LISTEN TO THE OTHER PERSON. YES____NO____

16. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT BETWEEN MY BROTHERS OR SISTERS, I TRY TO USE MEDIATION.
YES____ NO____

17. WHEN THERE IS A CONFLICT BETWEEN MY FRIENDS, I TRY TO USE MEDIATION. YES____NO____

18. WHEN I HAVE A CONFLICT, I GO TO MEDIATION. YES____ NO____

19. MEDIATION IS A BETTER WAY TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS THAN WALKING AWAY. YES___NO___

20. MEDIATION IS A BETTER WAY TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS THAN CONFRONTATION. YES____NO____

21. I'M A TRAINED PEER MEDIATOR. YES____ NO____